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Sensitization of sustainable heritage based temple tourism in Tamil Nadu delta region

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Abstract

Temple tourism in India, especially in Tamil Nadu, has long been a cornerstone of both religious and cultural heritage. Thanjavur district, renowned for its magnificent Chola-era temples like the Brihadeeswarar Temple, attracts a significant number of tourists seeking spiritual fulfilment and historical exploration. However, despite its rich legacy, the awareness among tourists regarding the architectural, cultural, and historical significance of these temples remains limited. This study, titled "An Exploratory Study on Sensitization of Heritage Based Temple Tourism among Tourists in Thanjavur District," investigates the extent of tourist awareness and the impact of sensitization programs on heritage appreciation. It examines how tourists perceive temple visits whether purely spiritual or also as opportunities for cultural enrichment and identifies the barriers preventing deeper engagement with the region's heritage. Through quantitative data collection, this research evaluates various factors including education, media influence, guided tours, and digital interventions in enhancing tourists' understanding and behaviour. Findings suggest that while popular temples enjoy high visibility, lesser-known heritage-rich temples lack promotion and interpretative resources, leading to underappreciation. Furthermore, the study highlights how strategic sensitization, including digital storytelling, community participation, and infrastructure development, can enrich tourist experiences and foster sustainable heritage tourism. The research concludes with practical recommendations to stakeholders such as tourism boards, local governments, and temple management authorities for improving heritage-based temple tourism through enhanced awareness, better facilities, and inclusive policy-making.

Keywords: Heritage tourism, temple tourism, thanjavur, cultural sensitization, sustainable tourism, chola architecture and local economy

1. Introduction

Temple Tourism in Tamil Nadu: Heritage temple tourism is a fundamental aspect of cultural and religious tourism, especially in historically significant areas such as Thanjavur district in Tamil Nadu, India. Nicknamed the "Rice Bowl of Tamil Nadu," Thanjavur is world-renowned for its architectural wonders, religious importance, and cultural heritage. The district has some of the greatest temples in South India, among which are the Brihadeeswarar Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage property, and several other temples that are a reflection of the splendor of the Chola, Nayak, and Maratha dynasties. These temples not only are used for worship but also represent artistry, continuity of history, and socio-cultural development. Even though temple tourism has vast historical and cultural worth, there is a requirement for more sensitization of tourists about the heritage, conservation, and sustainable tourism practices of these sacred places.

Profile of the Industry

Heritage based Temple Tourism in India

India is world-famous for its cultural and religious heritage, and temple tourism is an important contributor to the Indian tourism sector. The tourism industry accounts for approximately 6.8% of India's GDP and employs millions, with religious tourism being an important segment. Pilgrimage and heritage-based temple tourism draws millions of national and international tourists every year, stimulating local economies and maintaining historical legacies. Tamil Nadu, specifically, is a popular hub for temple tourism in India. The Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) works actively towards temple tourism, facilitating sustainable tourism practices and heritage protection.

Dimensions of heritage based tourism in India

1. Cultural Dimension

- Religious and Spiritual Tourism: India has several religions, so it is a top destination for religious tourism.
- Pilgrims travel to sites such as Varanasi, Amritsar's Golden Temple etc.
- Historical Tourism Visitors visit UNESCO designated heritage monuments like the Hampi, Konark Sun Temple etc.
- Architectural Tourism - India has rich architectural diversity Dravidian Style
- Traditional Arts and Handicrafts Heritage tourism - promotes local crafts like Paintings (e.g. Thanjavur, Madhubani, etc), Dance & Music e.g. Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Hindustani & Carnatic music) and Handicrafts (e.g. Banarasi silk & Pashmina shawls)

2. Religious and Pilgrimage Dimension

- Sacred Sites and Pilgrimages:** Major pilgrimage routes are Chardham Yatra (Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, Yamunotry)
- Temple Tourism:** India boasts of the most complicated and ancient temples of the world, many of which are acclaimed as UNESCO monuments and
- Spiritual Retreats and Yoga Tourism:** Meditation and well-being tourism thrives in Rishikesh & Haridwar (yoga and Ayurveda), Auroville (Puducherry).

3. Conservation and Sustainability Dimension:

- Preservation of Monuments and Temples such as ASHA (Adopt a Heritage) Corporates maintain heritage sites, PRASAD Scheme Develops religious tourism infrastructure, and HRIDAY (Heritage City Development)
- Environmental Sustainability initiatives comprise Eco-friendly temple zones (plastic-free premises); Green transport solutions (battery-operated vehicles at heritage sites) and Water conservation (rainwater harvesting ancient stepwells like Rani ki Vav).
- Cultural Heritage Management providing protection to UNESCO World Heritage Sites (e.g., Ajanta Caves,

Qutub Minar) and Intangible heritage (folk arts, Vedic chanting).

4. Community and Social Dimension

- Local Community Participation involving artisans, cultural specialists, and historians in activities pertaining to tourism.
- Cultural Exchange Programs tourists experience India's heritage through Folk performances (e.g., Rajasthani Kalbelia, dance, Manipuri Ras Leela) and Workshops on pottery, textile weaving, and traditional cooking.

D. Thanjavur district: a cultural and religious hub

Thanjavur district is commonly accepted as the cradle of South Indian temple architecture and functions as a significant hub for religious and heritage tourism. The district houses a large number of temples constructed by the Chola, Pandya, Nayak, and Maratha kingdoms, featuring unexampled Dravidian architectural styles, detailed sculptures, and religious importance. Among the prime facets responsible for Thanjavur being an important tourist spot for temple tourism are:

- Historical Significance:** Thanjavur was the capital of the Chola Empire, which was one of the greatest empires in the history of South India. The temples constructed during this time are standing proofs of their artistic perfection and religious faith.
- Architectural Brilliance:** The area boasts the Brihadeeswarar Temple, which is among the best examples of Dravidian architecture and a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Other such temples as Gangaikonda Cholaapuram, Airavatesvara Temple (located at Darasuram), and Thiruvaiyaru Temple reveal the architectural skill of past Tamil monarchs.
- Religious Significance:** Temples of Thanjavur draw millions of devotees who come to receive blessings and perform different religious rituals, festivals, and processions.

Key most famous & known temples in Thanjavur district

Temple Name - Built By & Year - Specialty
1. Brihadeeswarar Temple, Thanjavur Raja Raja Chola I (1010 AD): This grand temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, is an architectural marvel of the Chola dynasty. The temple is entirely made of granite and features intricate carvings and frescoes. It houses one of the largest Shiva lingas in India. The Nandi (bull) statue is carved out of a single stone and is massive in size. It symbolizes the power, precision, and devotion of Chola architecture. UNESCO Status: YES
2. Gangaikonda Cholaapuram Temple, Jayankondam - Rajendra Chola I (1035 AD) Built to commemorate his victory in North India, this Shiva temple resembles the Brihadeeswarar Temple but with more refined artwork. The temple showcases advanced hydraulic engineering with a massive temple tank. It was built using interlocking stones, ensuring durability. This site reflects the cultural and imperial power of the Cholas. UNESCO Status: Yes
3. Airavatesvara Temple, Darasuram - Rajaraja Chola II (12th century AD): This temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, is known for its intricate stone carvings and chariot-shaped architecture. The temple is rich in miniature sculptures depicting mythological stories. It also features exquisite musical steps that produce different notes. UNESCO Status: Yes
4. Thiruvaiyaru Panchanatheeswarar Temple, Thiruvaiyaru: Early Cholas (9th century AD): This temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, known here as Panchanatheeswarar, representing the five elements. Situated on the banks of the Cauvery, it is renowned for its peaceful ambience and sacred rituals. The temple is also associated with Saint Tyagaraja, one of the Carnatic music trinities. It hosts the annual Tyagaraja Aradhana music festival. UNESCO Status: No
5. Punnainallur Mariamman Temple, Thanjavur - Maratha Kings Venkoji (17th Century AD): The Punnainallur Mariamman Temple is a renowned shrine dedicated to Goddess Mariamman, a form of Shakti. The temple is famous for its powerful deity believed to cure smallpox and other diseases. The goddess is said to have appeared in the dream of King Venkoji, leading him to discover her idol and build the temple. Known for its vibrant Navaratri festival and rituals, the temple draws thousands of devotees. UNESCO Status: No

Key Famous Temples but lesser known in Thanjavur District

Temple Name - Built By & Year - Specialty	
1. Thukkachi Abathsahayeswarar Temple, Kumbakonam - Chola Dynasty (10th - 11th century AD):	This temple is located near Kumbakonam in the village of Thukkachi. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva as Abathsahayeswarar. The temple is peaceful, with fine Chola architecture, a sacred pond, and carvings from the Nayak and Maratha periods. UNESCO Status: Yes
2. Papanasanathar 108 Lingam Temple, Papanasam:	Legend attributes the installation of the 108 Shiva Lingams to Lord Rama. This temple is renowned for housing 108 Shiva Lingams. Of these, 107 Lingams were crafted by Rama himself, while the 108th was brought from Varanasi by Hanuman. The temple's unique architectural feature includes the main shrine facing west, which is atypical in traditional Hindu temple design. UNESCO Status: No
3. Arulmigu Vellai Pillaiyar (Kabartheeswarar) Temple, Thiruvallanji:	(Chola period, 9th century). This temple is renowned for its unique white-colored idol of Lord Ganesha, known as Swetha Vinayagar believed to be made from sea foam. The temple is also dedicated to Lord Shiva, worshipped as Kaparadeswarar, and his consort Brihannayagi. The temple's architecture features a seven-tiered gopuram, intricate sculptures, and inscriptions from the Chola period. It is part of the Saptha Stana Temples of Kumbakonam. UNESCO Status: No
4. Alagaputhur Murugan Temple, Kumbakonam:	It is believed to be originally constructed in the 3rd century CE by Kochengata Chola, with significant renovations during the 9th century CE and later expansions in the 16 th century CE. This temple is unique for its depiction of Lord Murugan holding a conch (shankha) and discus (chakra), attributes typically associated with Lord Vishnu. The temple's serene environment and spiritual significance make it a cherished yet lesser-known pilgrimage site. UNESCO Status: No
5. Sarabeswarar Temple, Thirubuvanam, Kulothunga Chola III (1176 - 1218 AD):	The temple is renowned for its unique Lord Shiva as Sarabeswarar, a composite form with features of a man, lion and bird. The temple's architecture is a testament of chola craftsmanship featuring a towering vimana that surpasses the height of its Gopuram a rarity in Dravidian temple design. Intricate sculptures adorn the temple, including the depictions of Sarabeswarar subduing Narasimha, showcasing the artistic excellence of that period. UNESCO Status: No.
6. Alandurainathar Temple, Pullamangai, Parantaka Chola I: (10th Century CE):	The Alandurainathar Temple is a remarkable example of early Chola architecture. The temple is renowned for its exquisite stone sculptures, including depictions of deities such as Dakshinamurthy, Lingodbhavar, Brahma, and Durga. The temple is also one of the 275 Paadal Petra Sthalams. Additionally, it is part of the Saptamangai Sthalams, a group of seven sacred sites associated with the worship of the Saptamatikas. UNESCO Status: No
7. Vada Bhadra Kali Amman Temple, Thanjavur: Vijyalaiya Chola - (9th Century CE):	This temple is situated in the Keezha Vaasal area of Thanjavur. This temple is dedicated to Goddess Nisumba Soodhani. The deity, depicted with eight hands in a fierce posture, is believed to have been the war goddess of the Chola dynasty. Devotees seek her blessings to overcome obstacles. The temple, maintained by the Thanjavur Palace Devasthanam. UNESCO Status: No
8. Sri Somanath Swamy Temple, Pazhayarai Vadathali - Aditya Chola I - (circa 871-907 CE)	This temple is situated approximately 6 km from Kumbakonam. It is one of the 275 Paadal Petra Sthalam. Shiva is worshipped here as Someswarar, and the temple is noted for its unique architectural features, including a sanctum constructed to resemble a chariot drawn by horses. The temple complex houses intricate sculptures, such as depictions of Ardhanareeswarar and scenes from the Narasimha avatar, showcasing the artistic excellence of the Chola period. UNESCO Status: No
9. Kalahasteswarar Temple, Kumbakonam:	Sarfoji Maharaja of Thanjavur has renovated this temple in the 18 th - 19 th Century. This temple is one of the twelve Shiva temples associated with the Mahamaham festival, which occurs once every 12 years in Kumbakonam. Lord Shiva, is worshipped as Kalahasteswarar, and his consort is known as Gnanambigai. UNESCO Status: No
10. Panchavan Madevi Pallipadai Temple, Patteeswaram - Rajendra Chola I - (Circa 11th century CE):	The temple in Patteeswaram, built by Rajendra Chola I in the 11th century, is dedicated to Lord Shiva as Panchavan Madevi Iswarar. The temple honors Rajendra Chola's stepmother, Panchavan Madevi. It features a Shiva Lingam beneath a chariot-like structure, symbolizing the bridegroom's journey to Kasi. It is near Patteeswaram Shiva Temple. UNESCO Status: No

Problem Identification

Temple tourism of Thanjavur district forms an integral part of cultural heritage attracting domestic as well as global travellers. Thanjavur district consists of numerous temples with rich history, including the UNESCO-world Heritage Brihadeeswarar Temple due to its historical magnitude and religiosity. Lack of proper sensitization of the tourist about the history, cultural and artistic heritage value of such monuments exists in the region. This leads to a shallow tourism experience that fails to immerse the visitors in the heritage value of the places. Major Issues Recognized in Heritage-Based Temple Tourism Sensitization:

- 1. Limited Awareness among Tourists:** Most tourists look at temples mainly as religious structures, ignoring their historical, artistic, and cultural importance. Poor dissemination of information about the architectural wonders, inscriptions, and traditional rituals linked with these temples.
- 2. Lack of Heritage Education and Interpretation:** Lack of guided heritage walks or experiential learning activities that offer extensive details about the history of the temple. Insufficient provision of multilingual

information boards, leaflets, and mobile guides for assorted tourists.

- 3. Inadequate Promotion and Digital Integration:** Inadequate utilization of technology, including smartphone applications, digital tours, and QR-coded interpretive panels, to inform travellers about heritage. Minimal use of organized marketing promotions to bring the historical and art value of Thanjavur temple tourism into spotlight.
- 4. Limited Stakeholder Interaction:** Poor coordination among tourism boards, local governments, historians, and cultural organizations in executing heritage sensitization programs. Lack of community outreach programs that include local craftsmen, historians, and temple authorities in the sensitization of tourists.

Significance of the Study

- 1. Conservation of Cultural and Historical Heritage:** Temples in Thanjavur present the architectural glory of the Chola dynasty, but tourists' lack of awareness jeopardizes their conservation. In this research, heritage sensitization is enhanced in order to limit irresponsible

tourism and protect these cultural assets.

2. **Improved Tourist Experience and Interaction:** Most tourists view temples as mere places of worship, ignoring their artistic and historical significance. This research highlights the importance of guided tours, digital experiences, and narratives to develop engaging and informative tourism experiences.
3. **Encouraging Sustainable Tourism Development:** Uncontrolled tourism may result in cultural and environmental deterioration. This research emphasizes the need to educate tourists about responsible behaviour such as waste disposal and respect for temple ceremonies. Sustainable measures will guarantee long-term conservation and sustainable tourism development.

Objectives of The Study

1. To understand how well the domestic and international tourists aware about the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of temples in the Thanjavur district.
2. To create an inventory of lesser-explored temples, highlighting their unique architectural and historical value to broaden the horizon of cultural tourism beyond the major Chola temples.
3. To study the impact of well awareness and appreciation of temple heritage can contribute to the conservation efforts, economic benefits for local communities, and long-term sustainability in tourism practices.
4. To analyses the role of education, media, guided tours, cultural programs, and other informational sources in shaping the tourist's awareness and appreciation of temple heritage in Thanjavur district.
5. To increase public awareness and understanding of the historical and architectural significance of lesser-known temples.

Scope of the study

1. **Geographical Coverage:** The research is conducted in Thanjavur District, a culturally rich area famous for its grand Chola-period temples, such as the Brihadeeswarar Temple, and numerous lesser-known temples of cultural importance.
2. **Target Audience:** The study will evaluate the level of awareness and perception of heritage sensitization among domestic (inbound) and international (outbound) tourists who visit Thanjavur's temples.
3. **Stakeholder Engagement:** The research incorporates feedback from temple management, government agencies, tour operators, local communities, and tourist boards to recognize their contribution in the development of heritage-oriented temple tourism.

Limitations of the study

1. **Limited Representation of the Sample:** The research can fail to represent all tourist groups since answers might differ with respect to age, nationality, education, and individual interest in heritage tourism.
2. **Data Collection Limitations:** It can be difficult to obtain unbiased and accurate information from tourists because of time limitations, language issues, or unwillingness on the part of tourists to participate in interviews and surveys.
3. **Seasonal Change in Tourist Flow:** The results of the study can be influenced by seasonal changes in tourist

visits, as off-peak and peak seasons can affect the volume and nature of visitors accessing temple heritage.

Literature Review

Mr. M.D. Ragulkannan, and Dr. G. Hanishkanthraja (2024) ^[15]: This paper analyses Tamil Nadu's status as a top tourist destination, with a focus on the state's varied tourism resources, such as pilgrimage centres, cultural sites, and cuisine. The study discusses the contribution of the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) towards promoting tourism, with a specific emphasis on local excursionists. The paper investigates the state's success in drawing both domestic and foreign tourists and the ways in which its infrastructure, such as accommodations and travel facilities, facilitates this expansion. It proposes further intensification of promotional activities to sustain this leadership role.

K. Chandrasekar and Dr. (Mrs.) S. Renukadevi (2023): This research looks at the religious and historical importance of Kumbakonam, a town famous for its temples, such as those that are said to provide spiritual advantages such as healing doshas and bestowing blessings for marriage and child birth. The article focuses on the town's rich history, which goes back to the 3rd century, and how the temples, especially those from the Chola era, make Kumbakonam a cultural and heritage tourism destination. The study focuses on the architectural splendor and historical background of the temples, making the region a tourism destination.

D. Devaanand, Swetha Madhusudhanan, and S. Nallusamy (2023) ^[6]: This study evaluates the accumulation and disposal of solid and liquid wastes in fourteen temples and five temple tanks of Kumbakonam, a significant pilgrimage destination in Tamil Nadu. The research identifies the types of temple-generated wastes—floral, organic, plastic, oil, and ritual liquids and highlights their environmental impact. It emphasizes the lack of systematic waste management practices in many temples, with most floral and plastic wastes being mixed with municipal waste and discarded improperly.

Dr. M. Hemalatha, Mr. S. Senthilkumar, and Ragunath Pee (2023) ^[7]: This research proposes a structural equation model to study the success of religious tourism promotion in the Navagraha temples of Kumbakonam. Based on a survey conducted among 650 tourists, this research emphasizes the significance of characteristics such as evidence of service, charges for services, and satisfaction of tourists as drivers of success in marketing. The research determines that "Service Evidence" most strongly influences religious tourism marketing success.

Mrs. S. Rajalakshmi, and Dr. A. Meenakshi (2022) ^[14]: The article delves into the socio-economic effects of tourism, with a special focus on Mahamaham tourism in Kumbakonam, a town famous for its historical significance and cultural heritage. The study emphasizes the global importance of the travel and tourism sector, which has become a critical driver of employment, capital investment, and world trade. It emphasizes the importance of tourism to local economic growth, especially in the form of regional goods and services consumption by locals that help the local firm.

Priyadharshini S (2022) ^[13]: This dissertation explores the cultural and historical significance of Thanjavur's heritage core, aiming to revitalize its environment through landscape and planning strategies. The research emphasizes the unique blend of natural and built heritage that makes Thanjavur historically important, especially with features like the Brihadisvara Temple, palace complex, and ancient water systems. The study analyzes the evolution of Thanjavur through the Chola, Nayaka, Maratha, and British periods, examining their influence on the city's architecture and landscape.

Sona M (2022) ^[17]: This study explores sustainable tourism development in Thanjavur by integrating its tangible and intangible cultural heritage into a multi-sensory cultural experience centre. The research highlights the city's traditional arts, crafts, and performances, aiming to preserve them in a living context rather than through static documentation. It proposes a site design combining architecture and interactive zones to engage tourists while uplifting artisans' livelihoods. It concludes that such an initiative can enhance tourism, preserve cultural identity, and support local communities sustainably.

Sona M. (2022) ^[17]: This study focuses on preserving the tangible and intangible heritage of Thanjavur through the design of a cultural "experience" centre. The research identifies that while Thanjavur is rich in fine arts and crafts such as Tanjore painting, bronze sculptures, and traditional musical instruments these cultural assets are under threat due to artist migration and lack of integrated cultural spaces. The paper proposes a sustainable tourism model that bridges the gap between artists and tourists, improves artisan livelihoods, and delivers a multi-sensory experience of Thanjavur's heritage.

Dr. N. Suresh (2021) ^[21]: The research examines how cultural tourism in Tamil Nadu supports global consciousness, maintains icons, and enhances social identity. The research highlights the significance of cultural landmarks, historical sites, local customs, and festivities in luring tourists. The paper considers the contribution of cultural tourism to economic growth and its ability to maintain ecological and social harmony.

Mr. R. Abilash and Dr. T. Milton (2022) ^[1, 10]: Focusing on tourism in Tanjore District, this paper emphasizes the development of heritage sites, including the Airavateswarar Temple and the Brihadeeswarar Temple. It analyses the role of infrastructural elements in supporting growth in tourism and finds tourist satisfaction to be a point that should be improved upon when it comes to transportation, accommodation facilities, and accessibility are concerned. It shows through data of a survey how successful tourism promotion in the district is.

Dr. T. Padmavathi and P. Varshini (2020) ^[10]: This study evaluates the factors which contribute to the sustainable development of tourism in Swamimalai, Kumbakonam, based on social exchange theory. It finds out how community participation, attachment, and perceived costs and benefits influence sustainable tourism practices. Findings of the research indicate that it is community participation and the perceived benefits that sustain tourism

T. Milton (2020) ^[10]: This study explores innovative strategies to promote heritage tourism in Tamil Nadu, emphasizing the need for modernization in marketing and experience design. The author classifies heritage tourism products into tangible (monuments, temples) and intangible (traditions, crafts, music), and notes Tamil Nadu's rich heritage, including UNESCO world heritage sites like Brihadeeswarar Temple and Mahabalipuram. The study suggests using digital platforms, thematic festivals, and public-private partnerships to revitalize the state's image as a cultural tourism hub.

Tamilmani. K and Prof. S. Poornachandran (2019) ^[22]: This research examines the associations of tourists' perceptions with their satisfaction levels toward hospitality services in the district of Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu. The authors applied an evidence-based quantitative framework to evaluate 36 different variables, grouped into seven categories: service quality, food quality, ambiance, pricing, transportation, convenience, and support services. The analysis revealed considerable gaps in service quality and tourist expectations, especially in the areas of pricing and convenience.

S. Clement and Prof. S. Poornachandra (2019) ^[4]: This paper examines the potential for rural tourism in the Cauvery Delta regions of Tamil Nadu, highlighting the unique characteristics of this area, which is rich in cultural, agricultural, and religious heritage. The study advocates for the expansion of rural tourism as an avenue for sustainable development in the region, providing both livelihood opportunities and economic benefits to local communities. The paper explores the role of temple-related activities and rural entrepreneurship in promoting tourism.

R. Panneerselvam and Dr. A. Apsara Saleth Mary (2019) ^[12]: The paper focuses on heritage tourism in Tamil Nadu, especially its UNESCO World Heritage Sites like the Chola temples and Mamallapuram monuments. Heritage tourism, though rich in cultural and historical value, is underdeveloped in terms of promotion. The paper discusses the factors that hinder the full realization of the potential of these sites, such as insufficient promotional efforts, lack of collaboration among stakeholders, and maintenance issues. The research suggests how heritage tourism may be improved with better collaboration from the government and travel agencies toward local communities.

Dr. K. Veerakumar and Shri. R.V. Suresh (2018) ^[23]: This research examines the associations of tourists' perceptions with their satisfaction levels toward hospitality services in the district of Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu. The authors applied an evidence-based quantitative framework to evaluate 36 different variables, grouped into seven categories: service quality, food quality, ambiance, pricing, transportation, convenience, and support services. The study underlines that cultural richness alone cannot sustain tourism growth and that there is a need for structured enhancement in service delivery. Finally, the analysis recommends policies to strengthen sustainable tourism by considering stakeholder perspectives.

Dr. S. Jansirani, and Mrs. R. Priya (2018) ^[8]: The article examines the contribution of tourism to the economic

growth of Tamil Nadu, with particular reference to rural tourism in the Cauvery Delta Districts. It brings out the distinct features of the region and proposes that rural tourism can augment the diversification of the state's tourism industry, which has hitherto focused on religious, historical, and cultural tourism. The study identifies challenges in the region that preclude tourism development and recommends an approach to maximize the effectiveness of rural tourism interventions.

Ullhas Charudatt Dadhakar (2018) ^[5]: This article analyses heritage tourism management in Thanjavur with respect to the importance of cultural heritage, traditional values, and natural environments. The study presents the problems involved in heritage tourism, including contrasts between local tourist populations and the characteristics of heritage sites. The study emphasizes the importance of enhanced management, such as cultural program development, better hospitality, and preservation of heritage sites.

M. V. Karunambigai and Dr. G. Geetha (2018) ^[9]: This research investigates the effect of tourism around the Brihadisvara Temple on the people of Thanjavur. The research considers the positive and negative impacts of tourism on the local economy, environment, and society. The research concludes that economic benefits are accrued from tourism but environmental degradation and social change raise concerns. It is recommended in the research that sustainable tourism policies, coupled with awareness and education programs among communities, are crucial to counter negative effects and reap maximum benefits for the locals.

K. Selvakumar and Dr. S. Thangaraju (2017) ^[18]: This paper explores the interface between literary heritage and tourism in Kumbakonam, focusing on the importance of literary landmarks in the broader context of cultural tourism. The study evaluates how festivals, art, and literary works impact visitor experiences and contribute to preserving indigenous Tamil cultures. Issues such as infrastructure, authenticity, and hygiene are analyzed through archival data and personal observations. The authors suggest sustainable development strategies to harmonize heritage conservation with tourism growth.

G. Yogapriya and Dr. S. Senthamil Kumar (2017) ^[24]: This paper examines Kumbakonam as a temple town with rich religious, historical, and cultural significance. It traces the town's evolution from the Sangam era through various dynasties including Cholas and Nayaks, highlighting the urban development around temple complexes. The study emphasizes the economic and social roles of temples, including water management through temple tanks and retail activity during festivals. It concludes that a sustainable urban design strategy, preserving heritage structures and enhancing tourism infrastructure, is essential for protecting the town's cultural identity and supporting its growth.

Dr. Sutinder Singh and Dr. Manohar Jain (2017) ^[19]: This paper provides an extensive overview of the tourism industry in India and classifies it into various types including adventure, cultural, heritage, eco, and pilgrimage tourism. It highlights how India, particularly states like

Tamil Nadu, has leveraged its religious, cultural, and natural resources to attract both domestic and international tourists. The study notes that pilgrimage and heritage tourism have seen significant growth due to the richness of India's historical monuments, temples, and religious festivals.

V. Badrinath, S. Agalya, G. Abirami, M. Aarthi, and R. Aishwarya (2016) ^[21]: This study explores the potential for developing Agri and rural tourism in Thanjavur, a district known for its agricultural dominance and rich cultural heritage. The authors argue that Thanjavur has not fully realized its potential in promoting tourism rooted in agriculture and village life. The study reveals how integrating tourism with rural livelihoods through farm visits, handicrafts, local cuisine, and traditional art forms like Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music could generate sustainable income for the local population.

Research Methodology

Research Design: The study follows a mixed-method research design, integrating exploratory and descriptive research approaches to analyse the sensitization of heritage-based temple tourism among tourists in Thanjavur District.

Exploratory Research Design: The exploratory research design focuses on understanding tourist awareness, perception, and engagement with heritage-based temple tourism. It identifies challenges in promoting sensitization initiatives and examines the effectiveness of educational and conservation efforts.

Key Components of Exploratory Research

Tourist Awareness & Perception: Evaluates tourists' understanding of Thanjavur's temple heritage, architectural significance, and cultural history.

Evaluation of Sensitization Efforts: Reviews the impact of initiatives such as Guided heritage tours, Digital information tools (QR codes, AR/VR experiences, mobile apps), Cultural education programs and this phase establish the foundation for further analysis by identifying gaps in sensitization strategies and visitor engagement.

Measuring Awareness & Engagement: Uses structured surveys and questionnaires to collect data from tourists, temple authorities, and tourism stakeholders. Assesses how many tourists are aware of heritage conservation efforts, temple history, and preservation practices.

Sampling Design

The sampling design here defines the process employed for choosing participants who will offer meaningful contributions regarding sensitization of heritage-based temple tourism in Thanjavur district. Because the study aims to comprehend tourist awareness and perception toward conservation of heritage.

Target Population: The target population for this study includes various stakeholders involved in heritage-based temple tourism in Thanjavur District. The research aims to assess awareness levels, perceptions, and engagement regarding sensitization initiatives among different groups. The key segments of the target population are as follows:

Domestic Tourists: Indian travelers who visit Thanjavur's temples for religious, cultural, or heritage exploration.

- **International Tourists:** Foreign visitors interested in Tamil Nadu's UNESCO - listed temples and historical sites.
- **Religious Pilgrims:** Devotees visiting temples primarily for spiritual and religious practices.
- **Heritage Enthusiasts:** Individuals, historians, and scholars drawn to the region's architectural and historical significance.
- **Temple Authorities & Priests:** Officials responsible for temple management, religious rituals, and cultural preservation.
- **Local Tour Guides & Historians:** Experts providing historical, cultural, and architectural insights to tourists.

Sampling Frame: The study is conducted in Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu, India, a significant center for heritage-based temple tourism. Thanjavur is globally renowned for its architectural marvels, religious heritage, and historical significance, making it an ideal location for studying the sensitization of tourists towards temple heritage. The study covers both major and lesser-known temples to assess awareness levels and explore the impact of sensitization efforts.

Sample Size: The sample size for this study is 304 respondents, selected to analyze the sensitization of heritage-based temple tourism among tourists in Thanjavur District. The sample consists of domestic and international tourists, religious pilgrims, heritage enthusiasts, and local stakeholders such as temple authorities, tourism officials, and guides.

The study employs structured surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions to examine tourist awareness, sensitization initiatives, and conservation challenges.

- **225 Domestic Tourists:** Indian visitors exploring temples for religious or cultural purposes.
- **12 International Tourists:** Foreign visitors providing a global perspective.
- **26 Religious Pilgrims:** Visitors focused on temple worship and spiritual significance.
- **11 Heritage Enthusiasts:** Tourists interested in history, architecture & heritage conservation.
- **30 Local Experts (Temple Authorities, Tourism Officials, and Historians):** Providing insights on sensitization efforts and tourism management.

Sampling Methods

The study adopts a combination of sampling techniques to ensure data collection from relevant participants while maintaining diversity and representativeness.

- **Purposive Sampling:** A Non-Random Sampling technique where participants are selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the study.
- **Stratified Random Sampling:** A Probability Sampling method that divides the population into strata before randomly selecting respondents from each group.

Tools Used for Analysis

- **Descriptive Statistics:** To summarize data, including frequency, percentages, mean, and standard deviation.
- **Chi-Square Test:** To determine relationships between categorical variables (e.g., awareness level and nationality).
- **Correlation and Regression Analysis:** To assess the relationship between awareness levels and tourist satisfaction and measure the impact of awareness initiatives on tourism satisfaction and local economy.

Software Tools Used

- **SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)** for statistical analysis.
- **Microsoft Excel:** Data Entry, Visualization and Basic Analysis.

Data Collection Method: The study collects both primary and secondary data for a well-rounded understanding of the research. Primary data is gathered through structured questionnaire surveys and direct personal interview with stakeholders. Secondary data usage includes government reports, historical records are reviewed, Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) documents and UNESCO reports on world heritage sites in Tamil Nadu are reviewed. In addition, prior studies on heritage tourism, temple conservation, and visitor awareness were looked into it. Digital sources such as social media (Instagram, Facebook, travel blogs) are looked into for understanding how tourists engage with temple heritage and reviews (TripAdvisor, Google Reviews) about temple tourism experiences.

Findings

Table 4.1: Frequencies Distribution Based on All Demographic Information

Statistics									
	Age	Gender	Nationality	State	Foreigner (Country Name)	Educational Qualification	Annual Income	Total Number of Family Member	Mother Tongue
Valid	304	304	304	304	304	304	304	304	304
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	2.5757	1.4836	1.0428	1.4046	.0921	2.1842	2.4408	2.2632	1.4868
Std. Error of Mean	.04171	.02946	.01162	.08159	.02899	.05431	.06481	.09029	.07556
Median	3.0000	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000	.0000	2.0000	2.0000	2.0000	1.0000
Mode	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	1.00
Std. Deviation	.72726	.51357	.20266	1.42263	.50548	.94691	1.13005	1.57429	1.31750
Variance	.529	.264	.041	2.024	.256	.897	1.277	2.478	1.736

Skewness	.175	.213	4.542	3.815	6.028	.235	.673	1.556	3.459
Std. Error of Skewness	.140	.140	.140	.140	.140	.140	.140	.140	.140
Kurtosis	-.354	-1.605	18.756	16.758	37.275	-.961	-.165	2.329	12.733
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.279	.279	.279	.279	.279	.279	.279	.279	.279
Range	3.00	2.00	1.00	11.00	4.00	3.00	4.00	8.00	8.00
Sum	783.00	451.00	317.00	427.00	28.00	664.00	742.00	688.00	452.00

The study reveals that the majority of visitors to heritage temples in Thanjavur District belong to the 18-30 age group (43.8%) and the 31-50 age group (42.1%), collectively accounting for over 90% of total respondents. This indicates that temple tourism is primarily driven by young and middle-aged adults, many of whom may be students, professionals, or family travellers. The representation of seniors (9.9%) and minors under 18 (4.3%) is relatively low. The findings suggest a strong opportunity to introduce heritage awareness programs targeting younger generations and to enhance senior-friendly tourism infrastructure to accommodate older visitors more comfortably. In terms of gender distribution, the study shows an almost equal participation of males (52.3%) and females (47.7%) in temple tourism. This balance indicates that both men and women are equally engaged in religious and heritage travel. However, ensuring gender-inclusive facilities, enhanced safety measures, and diverse tourism experiences could further encourage participation from all groups. Nationality-wise, 96.1% of respondents were Indian, while only 3.9% were international tourists, predominantly from Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore, and Belgium. The dominance of domestic tourists highlights that temple tourism in Thanjavur's District is largely a cultural and religious activity rooted in local traditions. The relatively small foreign tourist percentage suggests a need for enhanced global marketing, multilingual guides, and improved accessibility measures to attract international travellers. State-wise, 82.2% of visitors were from Tamil Nadu, reinforcing the idea that Thanjavur District temple tourism is primarily regional and state-driven. Other visitors came from Telangana (3.9%), Kerala (2.3%), Andhra Pradesh (3.0%), and a few other Indian states. This suggests that while Tamil Nadu remains the core tourism market, strategic partnerships with other state tourism departments could help diversify and expand the visitor base.

Awareness and Familiarity with Heritage Temples One Way ANOVA based on Age: The One-Way ANOVA results based on age reveal significant differences in tourists' familiarity with temple heritage ($F = 11.813$, $p = .000$), satisfaction with temple maintenance ($F = 4.538$, $p = .004$), media effectiveness in promoting temple heritage ($F = 6.251$, $p = .000$), and frequency of exploring heritage sites while traveling ($F = 14.129$, $p = .000$). These findings suggest that age influences tourists' awareness, satisfaction,

and engagement with temple tourism. However, no significant difference was found regarding public awareness of lesser-known temples ($F = 2.033$, $p = .109$), indicating uniform perceptions across age groups. This highlights the need for targeted awareness programs across different age categories.

ANOVA Based on Gender

The One-Way ANOVA results based on gender indicate no significant differences in perceptions regarding the promotion of temples for historical and architectural significance ($F = 0.806$, $p = .448$), awareness efforts ($F = 2.474$, $p = .086$), the economic benefits of temple tourism ($F = 0.311$, $p = .733$), and government investment in promoting lesser-known temples ($F = 0.812$, $p = .445$). However, a significant difference is observed in interest levels toward exploring lesser-known temples ($F = 5.907$, $p = .003$), suggesting that gender influences interest in discovering heritage sites. While gender does not significantly impact general perceptions of temple tourism, it affects the willingness to explore lesser-known heritage sites.

One Way ANOVA Based on Educational Qualification

These findings suggest that educational qualification does not significantly influence perceptions of temple heritage awareness, conservation efforts, or challenges faced in exploring lesser-known temples. Regardless of education levels, tourists share similar views on heritage tourism and conservation initiatives, highlighting the need for universally accessible awareness programs.

One Way ANOVA Based on Foreigner (Country)

These findings highlight the need for a larger study to better understand foreign tourists' perspectives on temple tourism. Efforts to improve visibility and accessibility of lesser-known temples could enhance their experiences. Providing multilingual informational resources, guided heritage tours, and digital engagement tools may be effective in addressing potential challenges. Overall, while foreign tourists show interest in Thanjavur District heritage, structured sensitization initiatives are needed to enhance engagement.

Correlation

Temple Tourism Economic Benefit vs Investment in Lesser-Known Temples

Temple tourism of Thanjavur district forms an integral part of cultural heritage attracting domestic			
Temple tourism of Thanjavur district forms an integral part of cultural heritage attracting domestic		Temple Tourism Benefits the Local Economy	Government & Tourism Authorities should invest more in Promoting Thanjavur District lesser-known temples
Temple tourism of Thanjavur district forms an integral part of cultural heritage attracting domestic	Pearson Correlation	1	.352**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	304	304
Temple tourism of Thanjavur district	Pearson Correlation	.352**	1

forms an integral part of cultural heritage attracting domestic	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	304	304

The results highlight the need for targeted tourism development policies that enhance infrastructure, accessibility, and awareness of lesser-known temples.

Encouraging strategic investments in these sites could further strengthen the economic impact of temple tourism in Thanjavur District.

Table 4.2.2: Correlation: Thanjavur's Temple Heritage - Deep Knowledge vs Experiential

Correlations			
Familiar with the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of temples in Thanjavur District			Exploring heritage sites when traveling
Familiar with the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of temples in Thanjavur	Pearson Correlation	1	.474**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	304	304
Exploring heritage sites when traveling	Pearson Correlation	.474**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	304	304

These findings imply that heritage awareness plays a crucial role in motivating travelers to engage in temple tourism. The results emphasize the importance of educational programs, guided tours, and digital storytelling to enhance tourists' knowledge and encourage exploration. Strengthening informational resources through heritage walks, virtual experiences, and interactive exhibits can further increase engagement. The correlation also highlights

the potential for targeted tourism marketing strategies that connect historical insights with immersive travel experiences. Promoting heritage education at an early stage and integrating it into school curriculums may lead to a more culturally aware and engaged tourist base.

Promoting Lesser-Known Temples vs Highlighting Thanjavur's Heritage

Correlations			
Most effective methods in increasing awareness about lesser-known temples			Believe that temples in Thanjavur District should be promoted more for their historical and architectural significance, apart from their religious importance
Most effective methods in increasing awareness about lesser-known temples	Pearson Correlation	1	.160**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.005
	N	304	304
Believe that temples in Thanjavur District should be promoted more for their historical and architectural significance, apart from their religious importance	Pearson Correlation	.160**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	
	N	304	304

These findings indicate that while the connection exists, other factors may influence how lesser-known temples are promoted. Enhancing awareness campaigns, heritage tourism marketing, and cultural education can strengthen this relationship. The results emphasize the need for

integrated tourism strategies that focus on both famous and lesser-known temples to ensure holistic heritage promotion.

Purpose of visiting vs Recommending Lesser-Known Temples

Correlations			
Primary reason for visiting temples in Thanjavur District			Recommend visiting lesser-known temples in Thanjavur District to other travellers
Primary reason for visiting temples in Thanjavur District	Pearson Correlation	1	.114*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.048
	N	304	304
Recommend visiting lesser-known temples in Thanjavur District to other travellers	Pearson Correlation	.114*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.048	
	N	304	304

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results suggest that while some visitors, particularly those with historical or cultural interests, may be more likely to promote lesser-known temples, religious pilgrims may not necessarily do the same. This highlights the need for targeted awareness efforts to encourage all types of visitors to appreciate and share information about these

temples. Enhancing guided tours, digital promotions, and cultural storytelling can foster greater interest in lesser-known sites. Strengthening the overall heritage experience can lead to increased word-of-mouth recommendations, ultimately boosting temple tourism in Thanjavur District.

Table 4.2.5: Correlation: Exploring Lesser-Known Heritage Temples vs Awareness of Visited

Correlations			
		Interested in exploring lesser-known temples yet with heritage importance in Thanjavur District	learned/aware above the historical and architectural information about the temples visited
Interested in exploring lesser-known temples yet with heritage importance in Thanjavur District	Pearson Correlation	1	-.016
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.782
	N	304	304
learned/aware above the historical and architectural information about the temples visited	Pearson Correlation	-.016	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.782	
	N	304	304

The correlation analysis examines the relationship between interest in exploring lesser-known heritage temples and awareness of historical and architectural details of visited temples. These findings suggest that tourists' interest in visiting lesser-known temples does not depend on their level of awareness about the temples they have already visited. This may indicate that some visitors are naturally inclined toward exploration regardless of prior knowledge, while others might prioritize famous temples without seeking additional heritage experiences. The results highlight a potential gap in heritage sensitization, where tourists may

not actively seek or retain historical information even after visiting temples. Enhancing educational initiatives through guided tours, digital platforms, and interactive exhibits could bridge this gap. Developing engaging heritage interpretation strategies can help tourists connect more deeply with temple history, potentially increasing interest in lesser-known sites.

Regression

Satisfaction on Challenges, Recognition, Awareness, Income & Media

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.561 ^a	.314	.303	.80562
a. Predictors: (Constant), Challenges face when exploring lesser-known temples, Recognize the UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Important of awareness and sensitization efforts are for the preservation of temple heritage, Annual Income, Media plays an effective role in promoting temple heritage				

ANOVA						
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	88.393	5	17.679	27.238	.000 ^b
	Residual	192.762	297	.649		
	Total	281.155	302			
a. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction Level with the Maintenance of the Temples Visited						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Challenges face when exploring lesser-known temples, Recognize the UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Important of awareness and sensitization efforts are for the preservation of temple heritage, Annual Income, Media plays an effective role in promoting temple heritage						
Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.481	.329		1.462	.145
	Annual Income	-.033	.043	-.039	-.773	.440
	Recognize the UNESCO World Heritage Sites	.097	.224	.021	.431	.667
	Media plays an effective role in promoting temple heritage	.310	.063	.266	4.926L	.000
	Important of awareness and satisfaction efforts are for the preservation of temple heritage	.461	.068	.360	6.822	.000
	Challenges face when exploring lesser known temples	.061	.034	.086	1.759	.080
a. Dependent Variable: Satisfaction Level with the Maintenance of the Temples Visited						

The model explains 31.4% of the variance in satisfaction levels ($R^2 = 0.314$), indicating a moderate relationship. The ANOVA results confirm statistical significance ($F = 27.238$, $p = 0.000$). Among the predictors, media effectiveness ($\beta = 0.266$, $p = 0.000$) and awareness efforts ($\beta = 0.360$, $p = 0.000$) positively impact satisfaction, while income ($\beta = -0.039$, $p = 0.440$) and recognition of UNESCO sites ($\beta =$

0.021 , $p = 0.667$) show no significant effect. Challenges in exploring lesser-known temples ($\beta = 0.086$, $p = 0.080$) have a marginal but insignificant impact. These findings highlight the need for stronger awareness initiatives and media engagement to improve visitor satisfaction and address challenges in lesser-known temples.

Table 4.3.2: Interest on Investment, Challenges, Purpose, Awareness and Media

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.263 ^a	.069	.054	.19005

These findings suggest that while investment and personal motivation play a role in temple exploration, media and perceived challenges do not strongly impact visitor interest.

Future efforts should focus on increasing investments and highlighting cultural and historical significance to enhance interest in lesser-known heritage sites.

Table 4.3.3: Explore Heritage Sites on Participation, Visits, Education and Income

Model Summary					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	.376 ^a	.141	.130	.79440	
a. Predictors: (Constant), Participate in an organized heritage walk or cultural tour focusing on lesser-known temples, Visited Temples in Thanjavur District before, Educational Qualification, Annual Income					
ANOVA ^a					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	31.068	4	7.767	12.308	.000 ^b
Residual	188.691	299	.631		
Total	219.760	303			

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.993	.329		3.015	.003
	Annual Income	-.197	.041	-.261	-4.811	.000
	Educational Qualification	.009	.049	.010	.185	.853
	Visited Temples in Thanjavur Dist. before	.805	.236	.184	3.410	.001
	Participate in an organized heritage walk or cultural tour focusing on lesser-known temples	.417	.157	.144	2.662	.008

The multiple regression analysis examines the factors influencing the exploration of heritage sites while traveling, including participation in heritage walks, past temple visits, education, and income. These findings highlight the importance of promoting guided heritage walks and

encouraging temple visits to foster greater engagement with heritage tourism.

Chi-square test

Table 4.4.1: State Familiar with the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of temples in Thanjavur District

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	37.360 ^a	40	.590
Likelihood Ratio	37.308	40	.592
Linear-by-Linear Association	.644	1	.422
N of Valid Cases	292		
a. 49 cells (89.1%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03.			

The Chi-Square test examines the relationship between state of residence and familiarity with the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of temples in Thanjavur District. The Pearson Chi-Square value (37.360, $p = 0.590$) and Likelihood Ratio (37.308, $p = 0.592$) indicate that there is no statistically significant association between a respondent's state and their level of familiarity ($p > 0.05$). Additionally, the Linear-by-Linear Association (0.644, $p = 0.422$) confirms that there is no meaningful trend in the data. Since 89.1% of cells have an expected count less than 5, the test results should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes for many states. However, the data shows that respondents from Tamil Nadu (the local state) have the highest familiarity levels, while those from other

states exhibit varying degrees of knowledge, with several states having very few or no respondents in certain familiarity categories.

These findings suggest that heritage awareness is largely concentrated among local residents, while visitors from other states may have lower familiarity with Thanjavur's temple heritage. To enhance awareness, targeted educational and promotional efforts such as digital campaigns, heritage tourism packages, and interstate cultural collaborations should be implemented to attract a broader audience and improve historical and architectural appreciation of Thanjavur's temples across different regions. Although the overall relationship is not statistically significant, the findings suggest a positive trend where greater engagement

with heritage tourism is associated with stronger recognition of its economic benefits. This implies that encouraging more people to explore heritage sites could enhance awareness of temple tourism's role in supporting local economies. Tourism boards, policymakers, and cultural organizations should promote heritage exploration through guided tours, educational programs, and marketing campaigns to further strengthen public recognition of temple tourism's economic contributions.

The research finds that a majority of respondents were familiar with the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of Thanjavur District temples. However, awareness levels varied based on age, education, and previous exposure to heritage tourism. Frequent temple visitors and those with a strong educational background showed higher levels of awareness, while occasional visitors and tourists from other states exhibited relatively lower familiarity. A key finding is that most visitors first learned about Thanjavur District temples from family and friends (65.8%), rather than through formal education or digital platforms. This emphasizes the role of word-of-mouth and generational knowledge transmission in heritage tourism. However, only a small percentage (18.4%) learned through social media and educational institutions, indicating a need for more digital and academic engagement in heritage tourism promotion. Interestingly, while awareness of famous UNESCO-listed temples like Brihadeeswarar Temple was high, there was limited knowledge about lesser-known heritage sites. More than half of the respondents had never visited or were unaware of these sites, suggesting a need for targeted campaigns to promote smaller, historically significant temples in the region.

5. Implications and conclusion

1. Strengthen Digital Promotion of Lesser-Known Temples: To attract more tourists to lesser-known temples, immersive digital storytelling techniques should be employed. Creating 360° virtual tours of temple interiors and surroundings can provide a preview experience to virtual tourists. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube can be used to post engaging short videos, historical snippets, and reel series on temple myths and legends.

2. Enhance Tourist Infrastructure: Many temples, especially those that are not popular, lack basic infrastructure which affects the tourist experience. Essential facilities like clean restrooms, safe drinking water, waiting lounges, and shaded resting spots should be provided. Multilingual signboards and wayfinding maps should be installed to help international and non-native tourists navigate comfortably. Additionally, introducing amenities such as first-aid kits, ATM kiosks, and souvenir shops can increase convenience and satisfaction.

3. Collaborate with Educational Institutions: Schools, colleges, and universities should be encouraged to integrate temple heritage education into their extracurricular activities. Organizing educational trips to historical temples can provide students with a hands-on learning experience about architecture, history, and religion. Heritage clubs can be formed in institutions to conduct regular seminars, debates, and exhibitions on local temple art and stories.

4. Empower Local Communities: Local communities should be at the heart of temple tourism development, as they are the true custodians of cultural traditions. By offering vocational training programs for guiding, handicraft production, and hospitality, locals can earn a sustainable income. Encouraging them to operate homestays, food stalls, and traditional art performances can elevate the authenticity of tourist experiences.

5. Organize Heritage Festivals and Trails: Creating thematic temple trails that link both popular and obscure temples can encourage tourists to explore more locations. Organizing annual cultural festivals that include folk dance, classical music, traditional food, and temple history storytelling will attract a diverse audience. These events should be marketed as both spiritual and educational gatherings to draw in history enthusiasts, pilgrims, and curious travelers.

6. Improve Accessibility and Connectivity: Many temples are located in remote or interior villages, making access difficult for tourists. There is a need to enhance connectivity through better roads, improved public transport, and last-mile connectivity options like cycle rentals and battery-operated rickshaws. Mobile applications that offer real-time bus/train updates, temple timings, and GPS-based temple route maps will ease the journey.

7. Promote Conservation Awareness through Media: Awareness campaigns using visual media such as documentaries, short films, and interviews with historians and architects can spark public interest in temple conservation. "Before and after" visuals of restoration work can serve as powerful narratives in showcasing transformation. Collaborations with OTT platforms, travel shows, and cultural YouTube channels can amplify these efforts.

Conclusions

Heritage-based temple tourism in Thanjavur District serves as a powerful cultural conduit between the past and the present, merging sacred devotion with historical continuity and artistic excellence. This exploratory study was designed not only to assess the current level of awareness among tourists regarding temple heritage but also to understand how sensitization strategies can transform visitor experiences and support long-term sustainable tourism. As the findings suggest, there is immense untapped potential in leveraging Thanjavur district lesser-known temples to foster economic vitality, cultural preservation, and community empowerment. Temples in Thanjavur District are living museums that hold within their walls the echoes of Chola, Nayak, and Maratha dynasties. Their architectural brilliance, embedded inscriptions, and mythological significance tell stories that transcend generations.

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